PROBLEMS AT WORK

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Abstract

A collection of short stories.

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Preface

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Contents

“Bandera”

Y’all want something real. Y’all live in Austin, where autumn is one long festival weekend, and every thoroughfare is overhung with vinyl banners punched with holes so the wind can get to work, and y’all want out. Just for a weekend. Y’all want to leave behind the organic neighborhood Saturday markets and the middle-aged triathletes. Y’all want to see Texas, the way y’all always thought y’all would.

Y’all aren’t from Texas. Y’all are from LA, and Madison, and San Francisco via Madison, and Russia via San Francisco. Y’all moved to Austin for grad school, but also because it was Texas, and some part of y’all had always wanted that: cowboys, cowgirls, deserts. But Austin isn’t like that, and y’all realize, over margherita pizza and extra hoppy beers, that y’all could do something about it. Y’all could go west, to real cowboy country. The way to Bandera isn’t easy. Y’all didn’t realize how long it would take (it looks so close on Google Maps). Y’all aren’t used to driving in a place that is neither a freeway nor a neighborhood. Y’all drive slow. There are hills that hide the setting sun and leave strips of night in their shadows. It’s pretty out here, where the green hills and mesquite open into horse ranch and broken homestead, half-gone log houses fallen into creeks. Y’all lose service. Y’all go in circles. Y’all laugh at the names of little hill country roads: Verde Creek, Prison Canyon Road, Dead Poacher Pass. It starts to rain, and by the time y’all find the cabin, y’all stick y’all’s car in the mud.

Y’all get drunk and talk about the drive, and the next morning y’all are hung over, but still make it out to Maple Leaf. The park isn’t crowded—y’all’re a long way from the

city—and y'all manage to find a trail that's out of the way, where y'all can smoke a joint and talk about the kind of thing y'all talk about: music, the idea of nature, the invention of landscape, and different kinds of high. The park must go on some miles, but in the low places y'all can still hear flat reports of rifle fire. Y'all have some vague notion that deer are hunted here, but none of y'all know exactly what that means. At a bend in the creek the water flattens into pond, and small fish flit nervous in the clear light. Y'all wonder how they got here: did they swim down the tiny rivulets as babies, or did someone put them here? Y'all get a little lost in the park, but y'all still make it out before two or three, plenty of time to grab a bite. Only there almost isn't any place where y'all can grab a bite. There are only one or two little dining rooms, Texas German places that stink of sausage grease, and y'all sure as hell aren't getting anything vegetarian there. But y'all think y'all might have some food back at the house, and anyway y'all don't want to take too long: y'all want to save the sunlight for y'all's mushroom trip.

Of course y'all brought mushrooms. That's the only thing y'all think about doing outside the city, is eating hallucinogens and looking at trees—y'all don't know how to look at them otherwise. So y'all pass out the mushrooms, and it's a kind of game: first, y'all empty the baggie on the coffee table in the cabin; then, y'all take turns picking the pieces y'all want to eat, till y'all each have a little pile of dried fungus in front of you, grayish chunks and slivers marbled with blue veins. Y'all are so excited, y'all don't eat anything else.

At first, y'all try to record what y'all say and do: y'all have iPhones and iPads and Androids with cameras and microphones, but half an hour in y'all are just laughing too hard to even remember. Y'all's heads feel big. Y'all can't decide whether to stay inside on the couches or outside on the porch. Y'all wander into the high grass, which ends up higher

than y'all ever thought, high over y'all's heads like a forest, and y'all take forever to reach the pond, and the sky is bright green and jagged.

Across the pond y'all see a buck. Big, proud—y'all have never seen anything like him. He disappears into the woods beyond, and before y'all know it, y'all are following. At first he seems like a spirit guide, but then y'all lose him in the woods, and by then y'all have no idea where y'all are, and so it turns out he was the opposite of a spirit guide, he was a spirit decoy.

It's getting cold fast. The red sun is melting through the branches, and the naked oaks are black lightning leaping from the hills. The grass is slick with cold sweat. Do y'all know where y'all are? Y'all think the cabin must be downhill, but it's hard to say which way that is—the slope keeps yawing under y'all's feet, and y'all can't hear each other anymore, but y'all do hear the rifle.

It sounds like the whole hill cracking in half. Y'all are all shaking in different ways, and slipping through the mud and the roots, and y'all see the blood in the grass, and the blood is too bright. And y'all keep on asking, is this for real? And if y'all were a cabin, where would y'all be? And if y'all were a bullet, who would y'all find to bury y'all's little metal head in?

“Alicja, Love, Ligature”

I. Abstract

The entwined history of typography, love and madness is well-documented: the reader will perhaps recall several typefaces named after the objects of obsessive love (such as Gills’ daughter Joanna, or, of course, Helvetica, named after that timeless beloved, Switzerland herself); reports of unrequited love and its death-pact with type are universally observed in the literature, but we will not recount these more well-worn anecdotes[1], proceeding instead to examine the more esoteric history of Alicja—a typeface designed by the Berthold Brothers & Sieffert Type Foundry in Chicago, in the year 1921—which, in spite of its perfection, but for reasons which we will adduce, remains (alas) almost perfectly disused; it is our goal to shed new light on (or, as it were, outline with new darkness) the typeface Alicja, the truncated engagement that inspired it, and the delusion that nearly struck it out.

II. Oz Black

Black’s life was less career than brief epic. That Saint John the Evangelist (patron saint of scribes) speak through us, we humbly should ask, as we sing the travails of Osbourne Black, too-seeing man. When his membership in the Chicago Typographical Union was challenged—“too young to vote”—who could ignore his argument?

[1] Such as that of the Brooklyn typesetter Anatole Kozlov who, in 1909, set his cruel love’s name in type, then, in an ingenious but futile attempt at fleeing life, swallowed the type.

> Brothers and comrades, hear me out: read the polling records from Big Bill Thompson's election to mayor: eight times on the rolls you'll find my name; if voting is any mark of age, then I am elder to you all, and due your deference.[2]

In fact, Black was barely fourteen years of age at the time he gave the speech, in May 1917. After hearing from a carnival fortune teller that he would find, in a great city, an indestructible love, he abandoned his boyhood home of Hudson, Ohio, to stow himself away, first on trains to Muskegon, Michigan, and then on the pleasure cruiser *USS Althea* to the Great Lakes, until it was sunk by ice. The sole survivor, Black was stranded on an island in Lake Michigan for over a month, before being rescued by a yacht crew and making his way under sail to Chicago, having traversed over 350 miles (for him, the universe).

Once in Chicago, he went to work at a small press, adding his name to the long catalog of great men who began their careers as printer's devils (bitter Ambrose Bierce, poor Ben Franklin, Thomas Jefferson the borrower, Walt Whitman the depressive, star-crossed Samuel Clemens). The job required him to reach the high shelves stacked with type. Black (still immature in stature) wore 6" risers under his shoes; under his long trousers, his foreman once spied them out; Oz would have been discovered if divine intervention hadn't filled the warehouse with furnace-smoke and whisked him to safety.

Black embodied the Prohibition-era virtues—secrecy and bravado. After hours of mixing tubs of ink, Black's adolescent muscles burned; he would tell his coworkers that he was ducking out to a speakeasy for a gin, then sneak across the street to the butcher's shop (the skin up to his elbows stained as black as a Model T) to massage his forearms with ice

[2] *Annals of the Chicago Typographical Union*, June 1917.

from the butcher's new GE freezer.[3] He made this "gin run" so often that his workmates began to worry for his young liver. His duties even required a sort of descent into the underworld, a workaday katabasis: one of Black's duties as a printer's devil was to gather worn or broken type in a bin, known as a 'hellbox,' and carry it down the dark basement stairs to a furnace for melting and recasting; a tireless autodidact, Black would hide stacks of books (borrowed from the Chicago Public Library), burying them in the heaps of broken type; then, when he was alone, he would sit by the hellbox and read in the light of the furnace. After Oz had worked for the printer for over a year, his supervisor found occasion to go sifting through the hellbox for a spare ampersand. When he found a copy of *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, the foreman knew he had an imposter on his hands. This led quickly to the discovery of Oz' true age by his employer, and would have been fatal for his printing career were it not for America's entry into World War I—when all the work-aged boys were called up for the Army, printers metamorphosed into privates, lead type into bullets, and stains of ink into stains of blood. But that metamorphosis belongs, sadly, to another epic.

But if Oz Black's career as a typesetter is epic, then his career as a type designer is fairy tale. By the time Black had hair on his chest, he was the head typesetter at Werner Printing and Engraving in Chicago. Poker games took place in the shop after the end of work each day, but the owner, who knew Oz was young and something of a bumpkin, had strictly forbidden him from gambling; yet in the summer of 1919, when the owner left on a

[3] This is likely the first time Black met his young future fiancée: The printer was across the street from Lesniewski's Butcher Shop, operated by Alicja's uncle Cezary. Alicja helped out with the family business; Black later recalled Alicja's blood-soaked hands as they hacked off chunks of ice with a meat cleaver. She never charged him for the ice.

cruise for Argentina, Oz played every hand—that is, until he exhausted his credit with his unscrupulous underlings. It took some six days. Black stopped eating and kept gambling. One of the players, feeling bad for the green Black, offered to return his share of Black's losses, on the condition that Black find the designer of a certain typeface,[4] which the shop was using on their then-current project—and shake the designer's hand. Black felt little fear and no small amount of hunger, and so began his search for the face's creator at once.

Black's breadcrumb trail was brief: he soon learned that Berthold Brothers & Sieffert, the type foundry that created the typeface, was there in Chicago, and at their Elston Street offices the next day, after a long shift, Black appeared, asking to speak to the man designer of the typeface. He was shown to the offices of Franz Wiebking, then lead designer at BB&S. Wiebking was (being at heart a kind of ad-man) always happy to meet a customer; but (being at gut a kind of neat-freak) Wiebking took a rain check on the handshake when he saw Oz' ink-stained arms. To the same office, once per day, for the next two days, and to similar effect, returned Oz. On the fourth day, after being denied a handshake once more, Oz told Wiebking, "I intend to return until you shake my hand, and my hands will be stained with ink so long as I remain a typesetter. So unless you wish for me to hound you forever, you must either shake my soiled hands or provide them with other work." Wiebking made Black an assistant type designer on the spot and, a week later, they shook on it.[5]

III. (Re)birth of Alicja

[4] The typeface is named, confusingly for our purposes, Wiebking Black.

[5] To complete the fabular formula, it seems that Black became engaged to his princess around the time of his hiring on with BB&S. His notebook from the time contains a seeming allusion: "A. was giddy tonight in an evening frock she had made herself, modeled on an illustration in *L'Officiel*, a new monthly magazine from Paris. When I asked how she could afford the fabric, she pouted; then, she ate nothing at the diner, and when I told her about my new position, she screamed at me in Polish and stomped off in the rain alone … I know now that she will marry me."

The typeface Oz Black eventually designed was and remains something of a paradox. Vladik Essl, in his typographical history *Cipher and Civilization*, describes it (as the reader will no doubt recall) thus:

> Alicja was designed in response to a brief for a modern face Didone type, and appears at first glance to fulfill that request; but closer examination reveals flawless imperfections. Like all Didone typefaces, Alicja has hairline serifs. But while they seem straight, they are actually ever-so-subtly tapered, like the filament-fine point of a wasp's stinger—which is to say that unlike any other Didone typeface, Alicja does not have hairline serifs. And while a Didone face should have a vertical orientation to its weight axes (and what axes!), Alicja's thicknesses bear a subtle diagonality, giving it a hint of italic decadence. Someone will perhaps say that Alicja is a modern typeface nonetheless; to which I can only reply that, in spite of its modernity, Alicja yet hints darkly back to the medieval world: it is the body text for an industrial Inquisition.

So far Essl. But to understand Alicja properly, we must proceed backwards from the finished product he describes to its origins in Oz Black's inner life.

In July of 1921, around the time Babe Ruth broke Roger Connor's all-time home run record, Oz Black had completed, as we now have it, the Alicja typeface. The project had consumed the young designer, and by assuming both a new residence (*viz.,* his studio) and a new state of being (*viz.*, absolute secrecy), he had been able to produce his new design almost on schedule. Sadly, though the creation of the Alicja typeface flowed from a spring of grief, the grief's spring flowed on, undiminished by his creation.

About a month earlier, the sun had passed its solstice, the Black Sox Scandal had gone to trial, and Oz Black had begun the initial drawings for this new typeface. Before this, he retrieved what became the model for the design from the Chicago Police Department, a suicide note, after realizing that he had lacked a useable handwriting sample for the design's inspiration (his recently deceased fiancée).[6] In his notebooks, Black explains his motive:

> Just as a ground defines a figure, I now believe that death defines life. I thought I knew Alicja, but now I realize that, like the upraised face on a piece of type, she was visible to me only vaguely. In death I can finally see her clearly: the type has been pressed, the letters distinguished, and far from ending our love, this impression has only begun it.

Why had Black, the inexperienced young designer, been thus tasked with such a rushed typographical imperative? A fire at the BB&S offices earlier in that year, whose causes remain controversial,[7] had destroyed the hand-drawn designs of Franz Wiebking's last typeface (a design for Sears, Roebuck and Co., already well past due). Wiebking could not recreate these designs: he had retired, in late 1920, from an epoch-spanning career. So the task fell to Black. We must also note that, at the time he was assigned this job, Black was still very much in love. In the weeks and months preceding the design of the typeface, his skin

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[6] The young woman, Alicja Lesniewski, had an unfortunate story. From the testimony in the police report of various eyewitnesses comes what little we know of her demise. We know that she was a manic-depressive: in his notebooks, Black describes her moods as " … alternately bright and extinguished, like the lines of lightbulbs in the 63rd Street theater marquees." We know that, while working a shift at her job as a laundry girl at the recently opened Drake Hotel, a bar manager caught Lesniewski dressed in the fur coat of visiting Hollywood star Mabel Normand. We know that Lesniewski had removed the coat from the laundry room and impersonated the actress at the hotel bar, running up a tab of $378.25. We know that when her manager informed her that he intended to deduct the amount from her meagre paycheck, she became despondent. We know that she first planned to leap from the newly finished south tower of the Wrigley Building. And we know that, when she found it still closed for construction, she instead mounted the rail platform at nearby Slate and Grand Avenue, and leapt fatally in front of the "L" train en route for Englewood. Everything else is open to speculation.

[7] It is the opinion of this author that the cause was almost certainly arson. See the 1921 foundry fire, *infra*.

had become even paler than usual, and his already gaunt limbs had narrowed to hairlines. It is this grief, and Black's struggle with it, which formed the true punch and matrix of the Alicja typeface.

IV. Emergent Penumbrae

Soon after Alicja went into production, Oz Black withdrew into his private office. (The typesetters who set to work on the samples for the typeface were at first enthusiastic about the new design, remarking on the seemingly coastal recursion of the curves in the type, which traced inky archipelagos into seas of white.) The new type designer seemed to have reached a state of dangerous nervous obsession. (By the time of the year's first snowfall, typesetters in BB&S' in-house print shop were already complaining of irregularities in the new projects.) In his notebooks from this time, Black records spending hours staring at his few souvenirs from Lesniewski's life: the negative of a portrait photograph, which rendered her hair blonde, her eyes gray and her hair a deep tan— "the closest she would ever come to looking like a movie star," Black notes—and the handwritten second half of her suicide note,[8] which followed a first passage in type. (Alicja print runs often omitted whole lines of type..) It appears that after creating the typeface, Black was even more haunted than before by his deceased lover. (Instances of inverted text were occurring at a disturbing rate.) It seems that his solitary research was in search of an explanation of this deepening grief. (Such errors were usually blamed on apprentice workers.) Shortly after completing the designs, he began to notice an unexpected pattern in the newly-created typeface: the letters themselves

[8] "My request: [illegible]. Your very zapped ex-fiancée bids farewell. Hugs and kisses—Alicja"

had begun to withdraw from his vision, and, out of the white voids between them, new and unsuspected ciphers began to appear. (It soon became clear that these printing problems were unique to Alicja.) Black became obsessed with decoding these emergent glyphs, an obsession which arose from a kind of retroactive epiphany on Black's part. (One typesetter was fired for drinking on the job; another for being albino, and hence bad luck; but the mysterious errors continued.) Black explains this epiphany in his notebooks:

> Of course, when I think of Alicja (always), it is of her brightness: when we ate dinner together at the Valois Cafeteria in Hyde Park, and she spilled her tomato soup on a priest; when we swam in the lagoon at Flint Lake Park and Alicja climbed the dyke, stood on the edge and dove into Devil's Lake; when we saw the Cubs play the Robins at Cubs Park, and she chose our seats, saying we would catch a fly ball, and when we did, she didn't even act surprised; so much brightness. But rather than darkening this brightness, her despair and death have only cast that shining in a sharper outline. It is the black, not the white, which proves to be the background.

Thus it happened that, in his mind, Oz Black had begun to bring Alicja back to life (while, in this shop, the workers were beginning to agitate for her re-interment).

V. Accidents and Enigmas

In the absence of Black's assistance, problems in the print shop mounted. We can say that affairs at the BB&S Foundry reached their limits after three events: a mishap, a cold snap, and a bad swap. The cold snap is easiest to explain. During a period of record low temperatures in November 1921, BB&S had to reformulate pigments after ink froze on the

press and refused to transfer. Hence was heaped, upon the already-harried workforce, an added anxiety. Harder to explain, perhaps, is the bad swap: the mostly Polish Catholic typesetters at the press finally called in an exorcist when a print run of the the Gospel of John set in Alicja shipped with every instance of the word "Jesus" replaced with "Judas."[9]

But Black was too wrapped up in his world of negative objects to prove any help. In notes scrawled in blue pencil on the broadsheet samples he stockpiled in his office, he attempted to taxonomize these unsettling entities. At first, the images between the letters seemed like teeth. Black spent whole days identifying their morphology, labeling U's and V's as molars and incisors in the wide, narrow black mouth of ink. Then, they became cthonic figures: a snake coiled around the beehive of an 'S,' or the ligature of an 'æ' became a vulva-chinned Baubo fellating a winged phallus.

Then there was the mishap. Around this time, one of the typesetters found an old small-platen press on the workshop floor that had been mysteriously set with Alicja type. He later reported that he had decided to remove the type from the obsolete machine before moving it out of the way; but the hinge on the heavy cast iron platen wouldn't budge, so he reached beneath the platen with his head and torso to remove the pieces of type. The heavy platen swung fearfully free. His face was flattened on one side, his skin imprinted indelibly with the copy set in the press; a union representative later noted that his visage sported the text of a *Chicago World* article from November 9, 1921.[10]

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[9] Superstitions of this sort were nothing new in the world of printing. Printers commonly believed, since the advent of the press, in a special devil that haunted every print shop, a mechanical version of Titivillus (the patron demon of scribes). In fact, early printing was often associated with witchcraft. Legend has it that John Fust, an associate of Gutenberg, sold a number of his printed bibles to members of Louis XI's court, claiming they were hand-lettered; when identical letterforms were discovered, he was accused of being in league with the devil, and of using the blood of children for red ink.

[10] The article, "First Radio-Telephone Station in the West Opens in Chicago," announced the virgin broadcast from KYW Chicago (the Chicago Grand Opera Company performing an aria from *Madama Butterfly*, transmitted from the Commonwealth Edison Building). But if this is true, the date on the accident report

VI. A Secret Script

What were the various parties to do to resolve their differences and despairs? For Black, the solution was a final hypothesis, reached only after revisiting the suicide note. The occasion for his epiphany seems to have been the initial typed portion of that document, set in the font of the Drake Hotel front desk typewriter.[11] After studying the message in connection with the typeface he had created, Black finally came to the belief that the negative shapes between the letterforms were a separate set of glyphs, belonging to an unrecognizable script; he set to work decoding that alphabet.

For the Sears Roebuck Company, the solution was brusque: the foundry received a complaint from Sears suing the foundry for, *inter alia*, delivery of the typeface. The complaint lists as a remedy the seizure of the completed Alicja type. For the workers, the solution was no less blunt. Following a meeting of the local Typographical Union, wherein was discussed the disfiguring small press accident, the typesetters at the BB&S foundry went on strike, occupying the shop.

But Black's new solution unearthed further problems. After weeks of wrestling with the ciphers between the ciphers of his typeface (during which time he was known neither to emerge from his office nor to take food or drink), the disturbed typographer reached a fatal interpretation. Hidden in the ligatures, Black began to discover messages from Alicja; no matter how random the sample text, new apparent missives emerged. They took the form of

(November 9) must be incorrect: the newspaper edition in which the article appeared went to print November 11, the day of the historic broadcast.

[11] "It ooks 1ke I'll ever be foriven bt mybe I'l hve a seond rn aroud the bses. [*sic*]." It's unclear whether the garbled spelling is due to Lesniewski's absence of amanuensical training or some irregularity in the hotel's Underwood.

freakish vows: she would meet him on the platform at Union Station; they would make love on the Lincoln Park Bridge; they would be married under Lake Michigan.

In his notebook entry for December 16, Black vowed to destroy his typeface at all costs. It was their anniversary.

VII. Fire

On December 17, 1921, the BB&S warehouse was mercifully near-empty. Adriano Dinapoli, a press operator working late on the last few pages of a print sample, recounted his near-fate to a reporter from the *Chicago Evening Post*. Not only did the fire seem to have engulfed the furnace, where broken and worn type was melted and recast, but also to have quickly spread to the rest of the foundry, where Dinapoli had to make his way down smoke-filled corridors, dodging not only spills of boiling ink from the upended mixing tubs, but also showers of molten lead from collapsing shelves of type; he was then able not only to climb on top of a steam-powered rotary printing press (which still spewed reams of flaming paper into the air) but also to reach a high window to escape.

Firefighting crews were late to respond to the blaze, due to a traffic jam surrounding the new Chicago Theatre's grand opening. After drowning the flames and clearing debris from the collapsed roof, the firemen recovered the body of Oz Black, lying limp beside a spilled hellbox which held the only surviving pieces of Alicja. According to the coroner's report, a fallen steel I-beam had punched its cross-sectional shape into Black's chest, which was dark with blood; the photograph of his wound resembles, alternatively, a white double doorway of flesh that opens onto darkness, or a ream of heavy paper, indented under type and pooling with ink.

“Doing the Needful”

Dan is a systems administrator at a web hosting company. He is one of several entry-level admins there with a graduate degree in something else: in Dan’s case, accounting. Most of his colleagues dress very casually—the job pays very little and offers no in-person interaction—but Dan likes to dress professionally, and arrives in the morning wearing chinos, a button-up shirt, and a pair of vintage eyeglasses, one of several designs he purchased recently, at a low price, through an online auction.

He arrives at the office several minutes late. The office is one enormous floorplate, surrounded by floor-to-ceiling glass, carpeted, with drop ceilings; the huge room is filled with row after row of wide, ergonomically-designed cubicles, each with two wide-screen computer monitors; the overhead fluorescents are always off, and the hundreds of monitors glow green and blue in the dark.

Once Dan has arrived at his workstation and logged in, the first thing he does is check his email. He reads a message from the management encouraging employees to take whatever steps necessary to resolve the problems they receive from customers (known as tickets). This attitude is referred to, in reference to the Indian dialect of many of their customers, as “doing the needful.”

As Dan begins to work on his tickets, which are assigned to him out of a queue, he constantly shifts in his chair: his lower back hurts, today more than most. He injured it lifting

luggage at an airport the previous year, and was laid up for several weeks; he lives in constant fear of a relapse, since he is not a salaried employee, and does not receive medical leave. As the morning proceeds, the pain worsens. He would like to get up and walk around—he knows that sitting at his desk exacerbates the pain—but admins are required to juggle two or three tickets at once, each requiring updates at least once every three minutes, so that the admins are working constantly, and can only leave their desks during breaks. The huge room is very still: the only movement comes from outside, where, over the northern horizon, huge white cumulus clouds cruise westerly over Bastrop.

When Dan's break arrives, he can feel the tension in his back as he struggles to stand erect. He would like to get away from the office—being here makes him anxious, and the anxiety sharpens his back pain—but Dan doesn't drive, and there are few places in walking distance: a Wendy's down the street, and, beyond the overpass, a Chinese takeout. Instead, he walks downstairs to the smoker's pole, where the admins gather to drink energy drinks and complain about management.

It's hot outside. Dan doesn't normally smoke, but right now he hopes it will help him relax. He sees Prince, another admin he has talked to once or twice, and asks Prince for a cigarette. Prince is one of the only black admins. He's also gay, a bit overweight, and missing part of a front tooth. Prince says sure, and rolls a cigarette for Dan from his pouch of tobacco. Prince speaks with a deep East Texas drawl. By the time Dan has finished the cigarette, he can feel the muscles in his lower back starting to spasm. He bends forward and clasps his lower back with his hand.

"What's wrong?" Prince asks.

"My back is messed up," Dan says.

"Damn. Anything I could do?"

"Not unless you can make my shift shorter, or my bus faster," Dan says. "At this rate, I'll be doubled over tonight on the number seven."

"I could give you a ride," Prince says. "I go that way anyway."

Dan thanks Prince for the offer and says he'll check back at the end of his shift. It is reluctantly that Dan sits back down to his workstation. When he stretches his fingers across the keyboard, he notices that the tips are brown from the tobacco. His back is killing him, but he can only look forward to the end of his shift, and the ride home in Prince's car. The shift drags by slowly. As night falls, the glass walls begin to reflect the dark room, with its rows of glowing rectangles and green screenlit faces: there is no wall between the two glass surfaces, and they reflect each other again and again, until the room is infinite and unescapable.

As the end of his shift nears, Dan's back spasms get bad—he can no longer even sit up straight. He starts to contemplate clocking out early, when a particularly tricky and time-sensitive ticket lands in his queue. After a few minutes of investigation, he can see it will take an hour, maybe more. Dan messages his supervisor and asks to leave the ticket to someone else. The supervisor responds with the standard policy: admins aren't allowed to end their shift before resolving their tickets.

It takes another hour and a half before Dan can leave; he's so busy with the ticket that he forgets all about Prince, and after he packs up for the day, he starts limping toward the bus stop. But Prince is waiting for him in the parking lot, and tells him to get in. Prince's car is a Ford Focus from 2000. It smells like mildew, french fries, and body odor, and the floor is littered with energy drink cans, fast food bags, and yellowed copies of old

O'Reilly programming manuals. Prince and Dan chat on their way to Dan's apartment. Prince says he has a music degree, and spends several hours a day practicing Scriabin, although he doesn't know why: he will never be good enough for it to matter. Dan tells Prince he also spends several hours a night practicing, for his CPA exam. He doesn't know why either: he doesn't want to practice account; all he knows is that things can't stay the way they are: something has to give.

“Rittenhouse”

Ed is a thin young law student. He wears thick black frames and tight jeans and skateboard shoes. Some of the employees at the non-profit environmental organization where he interns consider him a hipster. He comes in at odd hours and mostly keeps to himself.

The organization is housed in a small office on the eighth floor of an old commercial building about a block off Rittenhouse Square in Center City, Philadelphia. There’s a uniformed doorman; the elevator is small and lined with brass-toned metal, and when Ed hits the button for his floor, the plastic circle glows amber.

Ed has been told by Joe, the executive director, that the organization can afford to rent the space only because it is in bad condition. Now Ed thinks about this every time he arrives in the office. The cheap wall-to-wall carpet is stained and torn, some of the ceiling panels are brown from leaks.

Ed doesn’t mind. He likes working in Rittenhouse. He can go across the street to get coffee at La Colombe, and walk in the park on his breaks. Even his tiny office window looks out on the alley of a classic American city, complete with fire escapes. The problem is that it will not last.

In a few weeks, Ed will graduate from law school. His fellowship will end, too, and since the fellowship pays for his internship—the non-profit organization itself being on a tight budget—he will have to leave the office.

One day Joe, the director, comes into Ed's office. Joe Minas, Esq., is a small man with a bald crown, round tortoiseshell glasses, a trim beard, and eyes that actually twinkled. He wears suit pants, a white dress shirt and suspenders, and speaks with a mix of Ivy League polish and brash Philadelphia. Joe asks Ed how work is progressing on his comment. This is Ed's current assignment, a comment on behalf of the organization on a proposed rulemaking by EPA regarding the California exception to the 1990 Clean Air Act amendment restrictions on auto emissions. Ed replies that the comment is almost finished. Joe says he knows a city councilwoman who is looking for an aide. The aide would be working on Federal government relations, writing on proposed agency rulemakings on the councilwoman's behalf; she would like to see Ed's comment. Her name is Liz Genovese, and she's the council member for District 5, which covers most of Center City. Her office is right off Rittenhouse Square Park. Ed says he would love for her to see it, and Joe says he'll send it on.

The following week, Ed gets an email from Joe saying that the councilwoman liked his writing and wants to meet with him. Ed calls and arranges a meeting later that week, by the park. When Ed comes into the office the day before the meeting, he thanks Joe for helping him out.

"Don't applaud till the show's over," Joe says. "Lunch at a cafe might seem casual, but stay sharp. Liz represents the most powerful neighborhoods in Philly, and she came up through the ward system. She's old school."

"So be respectful?" Ed ventures.

"More like obeisant. I mean this is a woman who believes in the chain of command. And she has a reputation for chewing up her interns."

"Chewing out?"

"On. Through. Pick your preposition. Don't embarrass me."

Ed feels forewarned. But when the time comes, he's caught a bit off guard. The plan is to miss class and take the train, at two—a time unusual for Ed—to Rittenhouse. The subway station is stifling in the humid spring heat, and when he arrives in Rittenhouse he's sweaty and running late. Rittenhouse Square is alive with people: emerging from the subway into the bright sunlight, Ed dodges cabs across the street to the park, where old men play chess on concrete tables, girls with dreadlocks sell beads under a bronze statue of children, and couples cross from the garment district to get coffee at La Colombe.

Ed finds the gelato place where he is scheduled to meet the councilwoman. It's right off the square. There are black, round metal tables whose surfaces are woven grates of painted black metal threads, surrounding a hole for an umbrella. Ed sees Liz Genovese at one of these tables. He recognizes her from a photo on a government website: she is short and thin, middle-aged, with dyed brown hair and gray roots, penciled-in eyebrows, and a rose power suit and pearl necklace. It's about ten past two.

Ed approaches the table and smiles in what he hopes is a deferential manner. Genovese doesn't stand up or even offer a handshake; she just gestures to the chair opposite, less an offer than a command. Ed sits down on the small iron chair, which teeters precariously beneath him.

"Ed Blanchard. It's great to meet you. Sorry I'm late."

Liz Genovese smiles an imperious smile that is somehow more menacing than a frown. Her makeup, which looks almost purple in the shade of the cafe's awning, cracks along her smile lines, radiates from the corners of her eyes and mouth, like lightning.

"I'm surprised you were late," she says. She looks him up and down with just her eyes. "You didn't waste much time getting dressed."

Ed feels his deferential smile flatten to a grimace. He looks down his front to find that he missed two buttons on his shirt, revealing a mandorla of pale chest. "Well actually I had class today, so I had to take the train, and since…"

"Waiter!" Liz shouts, straight into Ed's face. "We want some gelatos." Her parted lips display yellowing teeth, and her wide eyes are rimmed by puffy lids, crowned with gathered spikes of lash.

She orders gelatos for both of them. As they wait, she flips casually through a folder on her lap, tracing the lip of her lipstick-stained demitasse with a white-nailed finger. Her legs are crossed, and the top leg bounces, dark-hosed and shoeless. After the waiter delivers these to their table, she picks up her little spoon and begins to talk seriously.

"The comment is good," she says, "very good, actually. But there are lots of applicants in this job market, so somebody really has to wow me. I'm not really sure you wow me," she says, looking him up and down with her little wooden gelato spoon pointing at him. "I don't feel wowed."

Then she smiles her cruel-looking smile and leans across the table with her spoon, as though she were going to eat him alive. Then she plunges the spoon into Ed's gelato, draws it back slowly, and places it gingerly in her mouth with eyebrows raised.

"But," she says, "I do have a half-hour blocked out, and my office is right around the corner. I could show you what you'd be working with, if you're willing to respect confidentiality, that is. Maybe you'll wow me after all." Her yellow eyes are wide, her brown lips are parted, her penciled eyebrows are high. Under the table, her hand grips his thigh. She

has mint-green gelato on her yellow teeth; he smells her breath, which seems to him the odor of inner decay.

"I would like to," Ed stammers, "but I have class in less than an hour, and I have to get back to the train..."

She squeezes his thigh. "I don't think you're paying attention. What you do is not up to your professors, or up to Joe. It's not up to you, either. It's up to me."

He stands up quickly, knocking the cafe table and overturning his metal chair. "It was great to meet you," he says. "I'm sorry I have to run…" He walks away, almost running, practically hurdling over well-groomed dogs and briefcases. When he reaches the park, he pushes through the crowds of shoppers and buskers, heading for the clear of the street, and when he reaches the subway station and gains the platform, he breaths so deeply that he can taste the mildew on the walls.

“Cherry Hill”

Philip is a skinny twenty-something in an oversized worsted suit. He wears a black tie with a silver bar, and sits with an old laptop on his lap, listening to its attached headphones. The train to Trenton travels through the riverside wetlands of the Delaware, vine-choked ponds and locust trees where a thousand pieces of silver filter through the leaves and flicker on the water. The line moves at intervals through older villages: there are clapboard A-frames duplexed into two-tone twins, and the train’s movement shatters across the storefront windows of the main street shops. Philip sometimes wishes, as he watches the villages slide past, that he could explore their neighborhoods and meet their residents; but he has no business there, and is not inclined to ride the train on days he doesn’t have to. He has a summer internship in Trenton, riding the train three times a week; it’s an hour and change each way. His commute drains him, and he usually dreads it.

On his way home one afternoon, the train stops at Cherry Hill and doesn’t leave. The conductor announces a problem with the track; riders are instructed to take the next bus south, in about an hour. Philip has never gotten off in Cherry Hill. The station is just an elevated siding that juts out from the sidewalk, with stairs, a metal bench, a ticket machine, a standing poster case for ads (Lion King on Broadway), and an LED sign announcing arriving trains. Philip sits on the bench and works on his laptop, but the battery soon dies, and he has nothing else to occupy the time. Clearly, this is his chance to explore the village. He walks down the street, the town’s only commercial strip, and follows signs to a nearby

park. He walks a jogging path to a wooden footbridge over a stream; he looks out over a pond, where Canada geese make ripples in reflections of a pink sunset.

Philip still has the better part of an hour before his bus. He decides to walk through some of the neighborhoods, and maybe chat with one of the locals in a coffee shop. But soon after setting out, he finds himself on a different path, this one narrower and overshadowed with pines that darken the faroff windows of houses and streets and obscure the gravel path that winds below, grown through here and there with small weeds and wildflowers; and as the sky begins to fold itself away, Philip realizes that he is lost. He wanders for a while in search of help, but finds no one. The time for his bus is approaching. If he misses it, when might the next one come? Philip can't afford a taxi home, and in the morning, there's an early train to catch. Finally, a jogger: a woman in a light tank-top and dark shorts. As she rounds a stand of trees and gains the dim straightaway where Philip stands, he tries to flag her down, jogging after her, but she keeps running, even picking up speed.

"Can I ask you how to get to the train station?" he shouts after her. He is out of shape, and it's hard to run and shout. "I'm lost! How do I get from here to Cherry Hill…"

"No!" she shouts back at him, without breaking her stride. "You can't ! You can't ask! You can't go there!" She runs faster, and he struggles to keep up. "You shouldn't go there!" she shouts. "Go away!"

Philip stops jogging and doubles over, surprised to find himself panting. He is burning up in his suit, and mosquitos buzz in his ears. By the time he catches his breath, the time for his bus has almost passed, and it is dark. He wanders for over an hour, winding

through neighborhoods of multicolor houses, before he finds the main street, and from there the station, and when he finally catches his bus, it is almost midnight.

“Tall Black Coffee”

Nina snapped out of it when the music stopped. She went to the laptop; since she was the only one working, she could choose whatever music she wanted. It was one of the perks of being a barista: the power to subject a whole roomful of innocent people who hadn’t even finished their morning coffee to your own musical whims. Afternoon coffee. She took her time queueing up a new playlist, then went back to watching the slow movement of the shadows on the floor. Adhesive letters on the storefront windows spelled out “THUNDERBIRD COFFEE,” and the letters cast shadows that formed distended grey words on the field of tiny grout-brown hexagons on the floor.

Then she played one of her favorite mental games: calculating how much money she was losing per second by not being at The Brixton. At the Brixton, where Nina bartended, she made probably twice and a half times as much per hour; often she would go straight from slinging espresso shots to slinging whiskey shots. But the bar shifts were less stable, so she held down the barista work in the mornings and afternoons.

As she was getting deep into her calculations, a phone buzzed. A text from Rob, the bar manager at The Brixton. A shift had opened up that afternoon, and he wanted her to come right over right. Ordinarily, this would be great news. Nina could use all the bar shifts she could get, and she certainly didn’t want to start turning any of them down. But today Nina was stuck by herself at the coffee shop all afternoon, well into the bar shift Rob had offered. Nina was supposed to be working with Jenna, one of the other baristas, but Jenna had called in sick, probably a hangover. Jenna was always partying. She would come into the

Brixton when Nina was working bar and expect to get comped drinks, then call in late the next day, her voice hoarse and drenched in self-pity. It was bad enough on any given today, but now it was costing Nina money. She didn't text back her manager Rob yet—she needed more time to run through the scenarios, to crunch the numbers.

Then, one of Nina's favorite regulars walked in. He was a tall black guy with dreads and a winning smile, wearing a tight V-neck over his ripped torso, and cutoffs that displayed his biker thighs. His name was TJ, but between themselves, Nina and Jenna called him Tall Black Coffee. Nina glanced at her reflection in the metal of the espresso machine. She was wearing cutoff grey shorts over threadbare fishnets, and a kid's size tee with a print of a wolf howling at a giant peeling-decal moon.

"What's up, TJ?" Nina said.

"Not much. Just getting some coffee before I start day drinking. It's my day off."

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Rio Rita's. Say," he said, "don't you work there sometimes?"

"Yeah. But I'm stuck here because Jenna called in sick."

Tall Black Coffee made a quizzical face.

"Jenna. Is that the girl who wears the tank tops with stains on them?"

Nina laughed. "That's the one."

He shook his head. "She needs to cover all that up."

"I'll let her know."

"You do that. Alright," TJ sipped his coffee. "I'm out. Maybe I'll see you around."

"Yeah," Nina said. "See you around."

She watched as he slowly strode out of the cafe, mounted his tall bicycle, and cycled off. For a moment, she just stared out the glass. Then something buzzed on the counter in front of her. It was a small clamshell phone with a crack down the screen. She opened it and read the text:

"SAY SON WHERE U AT WERE @ RITAS GET YR ASS DWN HER PRNTO"

It was Tall Black Coffee's phone. Hipsters always had beat up old phones, with no touchscreen or GPS, and the old T9 text input that took forever and switched the letters around. The cracked screen was de rigueur: a badge of legitimacy.

Nina began to scroll innocently through TBC's phone book. Who knew—somebody in there might be able to tell him where he had left his phone. Then she saw Jenna's name and number. She must have been texting him on the sly. What a slut! Then Nina's own phone buzzed. It was Rob again, saying it was her last chance to take the shift.

Jenna started to text Rob back to say she couldn't make it. Then she stopped, deleted the text, and picked up Tall Black Coffee's phone again. She scrolled down to Jenna's number and sent her a text.

"hey jenna. im at the coffee shop. i saw u werent on shift. u wanna come hang on yr day off?"

Less than a minute went by before Jenna responded.

"TBC!" Jenna's first text read.

"I mean, TJ!" came in right after, then: "Fucking phone!"

Fourth was: "How come you nvr txt me back?"

Nina responded: "I've been trying to play it cool, but life is too short."

Then Nina picked up her own phone and texted Rob back: she would be at the bar in half an hour.

Barely fifteen minutes later, Jenna rode up outside and stopped at the door to finish a cigarette. She looked ragged. Her frizzy red-dyed hair was pulled back, revealing the profusion of freckles on her neck and shoulders that was her version of a tan. She was wearing a Phish tank-top with blotches of coffee stain and plastic bike shorts and a grimace; she had on huge mirrored aviator sunglasses and exhaled smoke through her nose. She smoked her American Spirit down to the filter and dragged her way through the door, trying to look inconspicuous.

Nina shouted at her from the counter. "Morning, Sunshine!"

Jenna turned a dazed look to Nina, as if she'd been slapped in the face for nothing.

"Have you seen TBC?" Jenna shouted.

"Sure have," Nina said, unlacing her apron. "He just left, but he said he'll be right back. He mentioned you."

"Yeah?" Jenna asked. She took off her aviators, and her eyes were blurry and red. "What'd he say?"

"He said you look good in an apron," Nina said, then threw her balled-up apron at Jenna. Jenna caught it like a small, wet dog. Nina jumped the counter and blew past Jenna, who opened her thin lips but said nothing. She looked like a beaten animal. Nina was halfway through the front door of the coffee shop before she stopped, turned and shouted back to Jenna:

"Oh yeah, and when TBC comes back, tell him I have his phone," she said. "I'll be at the bar at Rio Rita's." Then she pushed out the door and hopped on her bike. Jenna just stood there holding the apron, her eyes following Nina as she biked away.

"Rosa"

Michael is more or less at peace with his job working nights at a downtown convenience store. Certainly there are arguments against it: he has to take orders from high school dropout managers and undergrad customers from his alma mater, and counting boxes of cigarettes is the most intellectually challenging work he does in a given night. When Michael came in tonight, for example, his manager Nate, still in the store from the evening shift, told Michael that the tobacco count was short: there was a tube of Skoal somewhere in the store, and Michael had to find it.

First, Michael redoes the count of shrink-wrapped plastic tubes of smokeless tobacco behind the counter, stopping every minute or so to ring up a customer. He makes hash marks on a clipboard: it is the only counting task in the store not automated with a handheld scanner. The count is still short. Next, he heads back to toward the back room of the store's office to dig through the stackable rubber crates in which the merchandise arrives from the logistics contractor, containerized and barcoded, to see if someone has left a tube in one of the crates. But Michael has to pass through the front of office to reach the back: the room with the video surveillance monitors and a computer for doing the accounting. On his way through, he sees Nate, suited up in a steel-weave-reinforced motorcycle racing jacket, bent over the desk, with his helmet in the crook of his right elbow and his left hand to his nose, as if he has just smashed his face on the surface of the desk.

Michael finds that the best argument for the job is its power to stimulate his curiosity. Tonight, after the two a.m. rush, when the bars close and all the drunks come in for smokes and sandwiches and then clear out, right then a girl comes in in no rush, lingering by the rollergrill where the hot dogs age. She has a rich brown skin and amber eyes; the side of her head is shaved below the dirty blue- and red-dyed plaits of hair on top, and every part of her face is pierced. She has several large tattoos: one on her left arm of a Japanese donjon (just the outlines, it seems, without any color or shading), and on her back, a long calligraphic script in Latin or Italian.

She smiles at him until he comes over, like she wants one of the dessicated hot dogs; instead, she asks when he gets off work. She sounds like a cat. When he says it's not till six a.m., she frowns.

"I saw you in here the other night, and I told my friend you looked cute. I'm not like a stalker or anything, but I thought you might want to hang out."

He tells her to wait right there.

Michael goes back in the office to tell his coworker Carlos he's not feeling good, and has to go. Carlos tells him he needs to tell their boss Nate. Nate's long gone by now, but Michael has his number and sends him a text that he's heading home sick. Nate doesn't text back.

The girl's name is Rosa.

Michael gets in Rosa's Honda and they drive northeast across the city, up Lamar, winding through midtown, then cutting across 2222 and cruising by the old airport into a darkened neighborhood. At first, Michael is intimidated by Rosa's house: the hooks on the trees outside ("for practicing suspension"), and the mirror on the coffee table. In her room,

his eyes warm to the soft pre-dawn light gathering in the windows. The light glints off the glass bowl of condoms by the bedside, with their glossy black wrappers; then the bowl is hidden by Rosa's body, the bare brown breasts and round shoulders glowing oil-smooth, the pepper-and-musk smell of her underarms.

"You probly think I'm pretty crazy," she says.

Michael looks around. He's not sure what the right answer is.

"No," he says. "I mean, you seem pretty wild, but not crazy."

"You're really sweet," she says. "I could tell you were really sweet."

Rosa's phone chimes. She bends down to look at it, then tells Michael to wait right there; she slips her top back on and grabs a Batman lunchbox from under the bed, goes downstairs, leaving Michael alone in the dark blue light.

An argument could be made that Michael's own curiosity can sometimes become a threat to his continued anthropological research. His immediate instinct, in Rosa's sudden absence, is to gather more data from her room. The dim glow of still-distant dawn begins to outline the shapes of furniture and walls. But the light is only a hint, barely discernible from the city's diffuse everglow, and the details of the room, such as the writing on her posters, remain indistinct, until his eyes grow slowly accustomed to the light, and the underlying features emerge from underneath, the way the reality of consciousness returns after a dream.

With Rosa out of the room, it no longer seems dangerous or strange. Michael inspects the tye-dyed towel on the wall for signs of decadence, but finds none; the poster for an electronic music festival seems empty of the exotic. Out of the silence, his ears discern voices emanating through the floor: Rosa's and a man's, deep and blunt.

It occurs to Michael that the real intrigue is downstairs: he decides to investigate surreptitiously. He leaves the bed and walks to the landing, closed in by the darkness of the stairway. The old wooden stairs complain beneath his steps, and he softens his footfalls until they are silent. As he descends the stairs, the voices from below grow in volume and clarity.

Michael sees, through a narrow margin of several superimposed doorways, a light from the living room, and hears the two voices emanating from therein. But between him and them a noise arises: the kicking-on of a refrigerator compressor, with its deep whir and hum. Michael tries to listen in for words, but hears only an odd blur of human and machine, like a badly tuned radio.

A yellow rectangle at the far end of the kitchen grows in the black as he treads across the tile. The compressor kicks off again, surprising him with its silence; he tries to stop in his tracks, but the tread of his shoe is lost against some hidden slickness. He feels his feet go out from underneath him in the direction of the living room. He flails his hands in the dark. When he feels it in his hands, he grips at the moulding of the entryway to the narrow hallway between kitchen and living room. But this only stops his upper body, the lower continuing on its way, and in a moment he feels the hard stop of the old wood floor on his tailbone.

Now within the living room, he can see Rosa seated at the glass coffee table with a dark-haired man. But Rosa's back is to him, between Michael and the dark-haired man, so all he can see of her from the floor is her broad brown back above her tanktop, inscribed, *Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate.* His back is numb, then throbs tight and pulsing, like a drum. He tries to focus his eyes, squinting to shut out the pain, to see what is before him; but his focus oscillates with a black spot in his vision, a kind of *point noir*, which spreads and

vanishes and returns. But he can see from his vantage on the floor up through the glass tabletop from underneath: everything is slightly skewed, like looking up through the surface of water. The man opposite Rosa at the table has his head bent down over the mirror, which blocks half the man's face; the bottom of the mirror is reflective, too, so that the missing half of the man's face is replaced with that of Michael's. Michael recognizes, in the half-head of dark hair, half a goatee, and half a reddened, young face, his boss Nate.

"Michael?" Nate sniffs. "Is that you?"

Nate's one visible eye squints down at Michael through the table, matched weirdly with one half of Michael's own pained face. Michael looks for an exit: the front door is just around the corner. But when Michael twists his torso to get up, pain pulls his back taut. The hardwood is gritty and clammy in his palms. He scoots weakly sideways along the floor, trying to hide behind Rosa's brown back. Only now does Michael learn that even this worm-like undulation somehow involves his lower back muscles, which lock up tighter and tighter.

"I see you two know each other," Rosa purrs. "I'll leave you to catch up." She's holding the lunchbox and a roll of cash. She scoops some things off the table, gets up and steps gingerly over Michael's prostrate body, towards her bedroom. Her legs are muscular and sleek, with a snake that climbs up from one ankle into the mystery of her jean shorts. Michael wishes he was that snake, clinging to her thigh as she departs; but instead he is left alone with his accuser.

"So," Nate says, "you're sick, huh?"

Michael groans. Right now, it's no longer a lie: he feels one hundred percent disabled.

"And I guess Rosa here is nursing you back to health?"

Michael groans again.

"You know," Nate says, "there are plenty of people out there who would be more than happy to have your job."

Michael strains to speak through the pain in his back. "Is that really true?"

Nate picks up a plastic baggy from the table and stows it in his biker jacket.

"No," he says. He gets up from the table and walks around to Michael's side, looming over him. Nate's motorcycle boots, with their thick rubbery tread, shiny chrome rings and thick leather straps, look like they could crush Michael's whole body. Nate smells like gasoline.

"But I still can't have you coming around here," Nate says. "We see enough of each other at the store. Work-life balance."

Michael coughs violently. "Maybe it's you who should stop coming around."

Nate freezes, hand in the inside pocket of his biker jacket, searching. "Excuse me?"

Michael turns his head with effort. "Unless you want everybody at corporate to hear about your little hobby."

Nate stares, unbelieving. The bristling hairs on his face seem to stand on end.

"The insurance on that bike can't be cheap either." Michael coughs again. This one hurts. "Tell me, Nate: how you keep up so many expensive habits on that c-store manager pay?"

Nate's face hardens. The hand in his jacket comes to life, reaches in deep, and emerges, holding a pack of Marlboros. He pulls one out with his lips and talks through it.

"Doesn't seem smart to blackmail your boss. Not when you're lying on the floor, right in the same spot. And you wouldn't want to bring any heat down on your new girlfriend, would you?"

Michael tries to think, but all he can focus on is his back. His muscles are on a ratchet that gets tighter and tighter, until they are ready to rip. He sees purple.

"You're not here," Nate says, lighting a cigarette, "and I'm not here."

"I'm not here," Michael says after him. The mantra seems to ease his pain, so he says it again. "I'm not here."

"Okay," Nate says. "See you tomorrow night." He starts for the front door, then turns and says, "And wash your uniform. God only knows what's happened on that floor."

As the front door to Rosa's house opens and shuts, Michael wonders why God is the only one who knows. He decides this is because God has to know: He knows everything. Everybody else has the good sense to mind their own business.

For a while, Michael stares at the dining room ceiling: stucco popcorn lit from a corner by a standing lamp, so that each encrustation throws a short, stubbly shadow to the left. Then he hears bare footsteps, and feels soft hands beneath his armpits, lifting him off the floor. Soft green light gathers between the mullions of the living room windows, and unseen tires whispers over asphalt.

They stand there for a moment, Rosa propping him up like a mannequin; at first he doesn't know how to respond. Michael wants to turn and embrace her. He sees in his mind's eye the various dance moves that might turn his face to hers: two step, pivot, pirouette. But when he tries to turn, he finds his torso won't twist. The knot of muscles

above his left butt cheek suddenly emerge from the unnoticed network of flesh. The pain runs down the back of his leg and up his spine.

"Easy, kitten," she says, setting him gently down in a chair. "Looks like you threw your back out. You must be older than you look." Her voice is jocular and patronizing, a sharp departure from her earlier, cat-like tones. It makes him think of his mother, the resident nurse: the way she laughs off the habitual advances of her geriatric playboys.

"I should probably call a cab," Michael says. This idea sounds obvious against the newly domestic morning quiet. Better not get a ride: having her drive to his apartment would be like taking an endangered species from its habitat.

"It's a shame," she says. "You seemed like such a nice guy. I didn't figure you would know anybody like Nate." Her smile fades slowly, lowering the bright silver balls that pierce the dimples of her cheeks.

"You know, you seem really cool," Michael says. "Maybe we'll run into each other again." The sentence seems to come from someone else, or perhaps some older, tired version of himself. Of all the things he could say, these feel the least foolish.

When the cab comes, Rosa has to help Michael into the back seat. They were further from his home than he realizes, and pain slows the time. Rosa's house pulls away behind them, blending into the subdivided sprawl, the early model cars painted in shoe polish with white prices and the dead grass glowing gold in the early sunlight. Michael sees the neighborhood as suddenly one of millions, stretching out the shade of freeway overpasses and billboards, growing in the brown dirt, sown by bull markets and bulldozers. When the cab gains the freeway, they all unfurl around him, thousands of sulfur streetlamps still burning in the half-light. He sees all the people in all the houses, loading into cars and

slowly flowing onto freeways, pumping into the city's thrombotic heart; he thinks of the glass office buildings where they work, the strip malls where they stand in line for lunch and coffee, the bars where they go to forget all this, the gas stations where they stop on their way home.

“Saratoga Springs”

The road from the highway turned off into dense pine. Sarah had convinced Mark to stop in Saratoga Springs on their way to the cabin in the Adirondacks; Sarah wanted to stop for groceries at the coop there, the last place to get organic produce before the mountains. Mark had agreed, even though he thought Sarah’s taste in food was faddish, and that they could hardly afford it, with the baby coming. He was happy to be heading to the cabin, and he was in an expansive mood.

In town, traffic crawled. The streets were packed with tourists in town for the races. Dappled late afternoon light filtered through the maple leaves and streamed across their arms.

“People used to come here for the hot springs,” Mark said.

“Why? Sarah asked.

“It was supposed to be good for pregnancy,” he said. “And consumption.”

He rolled down the windows, and cool air streamed in.

“Smell that?” he said. “It’s the minerals in the water.

Sarah sniffed the air: it smelled like rotten eggs.

“Sounds like an expensive health fad to me,” she said, impersonating Mark’s baritone. He half-frowned at the road.

They entered the main drag. From the open doors of bars, the chatter of race announcers floated on the breeze, carrying the whimsy-names of horses: Sir Cat, Lucky Coin, Shine Again, Lake George. They pulled up to a light. Next to them loomed an ornate

old Victorian building: carved wooden corbels and cornices lingered under the eaves, and arched windows receded behind an arcade of high, painted columns.

"Hey," Mark said. "Why don't we stop into one of these old hotels? You know—soak in the tradition."

Sarah looked at him sternly. "Mark," she said, "We've been on the road for six hours. I'm exhausted. Let's just get the groceries and get to the cabin, okay?"

Mark smiled generously. "It'll be relaxing," he said. "We can have a drink, take a load off. Recharge."

"I'm six months pregnant," Sarah said. "There's probably secondhand smoke in the hotel bar. Anyway, I can't drink."

Mark frowned. "That's just something the Surgeon General made up," he said. "In Europe they do it all the time, and their babies are better than ours by a long shot."

Sarah let out an exasperated sigh. "Do you even give a shit how I feel?"

Mark raised his voice. "Come on, don't make this a big deal," he said. "Why don't you grab the groceries while I check out the hotel? You don't want to see it anyway."
Sarah looked out the windshield. "Fine," she said. "But you need to call me when you're ready to go. And no gambling. You know we can't afford it."

"Fine," he said, opening his car door. "I'll call you in a few."

Sarah slid over into the driver's seat with difficulty, and began the drive to the coop. Rolling hills rose up on every side of the road, and the shapes reminded her of her belly.

In the hotel bar, Mark sat down and ordered a beer. It was bad enough that Sarah spent all their money on her stupid ideas, but it seemed cosmically unjust that she should force those ideas on him, too. And what was the point of going on vacation if you couldn't

enjoy anything? The bartender brought him his beer and, without asking, handed him a racing form. Jim Dandy, Birdstone, Sir Barton. If she got to have what she wanted, why shouldn't he? He began to mark down his bets (Whirlaway, Creation, Sunday Silence), and, immersed in the music of the magic names, soon became entranced. He broke even on the first two races, and by this time he had drunk two beers and was enjoying his fresh sense of independence. He ordered another beer, bet on the third race, and lost. At first, he felt guilty—he was spending money he didn't have, and Sarah must have been waiting for him at the grocery store—but then he rejected this feeling, as the betrayal of some internal shrew. To show the shrew who was boss, he ordered a round for the bar and bet on the fourth race, this time tripling the size of his bet. Through the blue smoke, Mark could almost see Sarah's face when he told her he had won enough money on the race to pay for their whole vacation. She would feel both love and remorse, which was only fair. He laughed and then coughed. The beer made him need to piss, so he dropped gracelessly off the stool and wandered through the back hallway of the bar in search of the men's room. On the wall in the back hallway, he saw a mounted photograph of the hotel, in sepia monochrome, dated 1863. There were horses tied up in front of the building, and everyone on the street was a man. When he returned to the bar, he found a bar tab on top of his racing ticket. He took the ticket to the betting window and slid it across the counter, as if it were solid currency. The clerk took one look at it and shook his head. Mark wandered, dazed, back to the bar.

"Close out your tab on the card?" the bartender asked.

Mark thought for a moment, then said, "Lemme give you a different card."

At the coop, Sarah took her time. Maybe he would call, and she would be late to pick him up. And wouldn't that serve him right? But he didn't call, and soon Sarah came to the

front of the check-out line. The checker asked if Sarah would mind her taking some other customers first. "It's just that you have so much," the checker said.

Sarah waited for the other customers, then stared blankly at the conveyer as it carried her items to the checker: a carton of organic orange juice, two heads of non-GMO broccoli, imported French brie, non-fat Icelandic yogurt, a bottle of Cabernet from a vineyard near the Finger Lakes. The beep of the scanner lulled her attention, so that the checker finally spoke, she had to repeat her question twice.

"Do you have another card?"

"Excuse me?"

"It's saying this one's declined. Do you have another method of payment?"

Sarah gave the woman a credit card her mother had sent her, "for emergencies." She started to call Mark, but remembered that he had promised he would call. To call him now would be to admit defeat. Instead, she loaded all the groceries into the car and sat in the parking lot, until the dense and distant leaves blended into one mottled, blue shadow on the horizon, and then she drove into the mountains alone, and when she got to the cabin, it was already dark.

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“Mountain, Lake”

The girl examined herself: she was still spring-pale in her strawberry and silver-spotted bikini, and dead pine needles clung to her lake-wet knees and the pink soles of her feet. Some of the shadows among the rocks were crawling, black ants the size of honey bees climbing the boulders and the amphibious roots; her legs stretched out for the sun, then recoiled from the ants—it was as if the shore were saying: you should not stay, get back in the water, behold my ants—and her quivering legs reminded her of the white spider that twitched its legs, clinging to the car window. The sound of young boys shouting from the road above broke in, they will crowd me, the shore said, one of them has a whistle, behold my young boys, and move on. But the girl imagined her pale limbs crawling across the lake, struggling, like the curved lines of light on the wavetips of the windblown lakewater that rose and disappeared; they seemed to struggle across the shadow of the mountain and, defeated, submerge. But you must come to me, the mountain seemed to say: I am furred with hemlock, but for the scars of rock that jut their facets from the green; you must come place your hands on the flint-colored face and the glossy stripes of wet.

And keep wading, the shore said, only your ankles pierce the lake, and when clouds mask the sun, the shallows will darken and chill. But the girl did not know where she might go: the mountain climbed sheerly from across the lake, cresting subtly back toward it like a great wave of grey stone. Please come, said the mountain. My trees climb straight against my granite face right down to the green-on-green waterline; won’t you come and see, please, and tell me if they grow up from the water itself, like a soil?

And keep swimming, said the shore. Here there are still smooth stones to blunt your toes, only black circles in the moss-green silt, impossible to see. But the girl had heard that the lake's dark center was glacier-deep, and spiteful in its cold, that even young hearts had tired there and gone to sleep. Were I you, said the mountain, I would watch the pair of peregrines that tangle above my peak; it would be wise to seek their mating-nest, for whose sake my trails are closed, except to you. Keep swimming, said the shore, for here the dragonflies still skip across the water like rocks, and bother about your ears. Consider, said the mountain, that my spindling waterfall drops and drops, and further, said the mountain, that something murmurs from the trees below. Does it not follow, then, that my stream must purl into the lake in dark liaison, hidden by the pines? Search my base as it gathers into sight: there, in the shelter of the leaves, see the glowing shard of plane-sided stone? How much do you wager it's a shrine to friendly spirits, and how much do I wager it's a grave? You must come to me, said the mountain: you must come to me, and settle everything; you must come, and rest, and settle down.

“The Thought Collector”

The thought collector has always collected thoughts: rare, antique, defective or obsolete, one-of-a-kind thoughts. Some he finds, some he acquires through trade, and some simply come to him. He once kept them on a three-foot particle board shelf next to his childhood bed, a shelf he inherited through a long line of older siblings, and which, in its carvings of initials, child-scrawl, proclamations of love and hate, told a hieroglyphic story. The thoughts he collected sat next to, and eventually crowded out, his other small belongings: coins ruined by coin-ruining machines, bits of broken glass the sea had fogged up, and perfectly good rocks some Indian had busted into arrowheads. He would pick up his first antique thought—a broken, beat-up one from the 70’s he had found in an uncle’s garage—and wonder at it. It was a junk thought, broken at both ends, made of some artificial material that made it almost weightless, with a smell of decaying polyurethane and, when shaken, a small angry rattle, like a trapped insect. He didn’t know what the missing pieces looked like, and that’s what made it marvelous: he could imagine an infinite variety of shining and complete thoughts from which this piece may have broken. He would set it down in its pride of place next to his other non-functional thoughts, some of which his parents had given him once they stopped working, and some that he had found lying around. There were some faded, fragrant French thoughts from the forties, a great big wooden British thought you wound up, and even a Japanese thought in bamboo and lacquer his father found in the service. None of them worked, of course.

His childhood collection remained inadequate-seeming: the small shelves, the undistinguished, dull thoughts, which, when he learned their origin, suddenly lost their mystique. In an attempt to elevate his collection, he would even try to restore some thoughts that came to him: he once found half a rotten rubber thought, and spent a summer looking for the missing half. But this, along with his other attempts to improve his collection (looking for other kids to trade with at school, or searching garage sales on the weekend) produced only paltry results.

It's not until he arrives at college that his collecting becomes truly ambitious. At home, the collector always considered his occupation eccentric—it even worried his parents, who were concerned that, in handling the non-regulation thoughts, he might be poisoned or maimed. By contrast, he finds college to be a great place to collect and trade antique or defective thoughts, and his collection thrives. He meets other rare thought collectors (mostly students, a few faculty, and the scraggly folk that seem to orbit colleges, in coffee shops and bookstores, playing chess and growing out their beards). Sometimes, at a house party, among the crowd of students, who as a rule carry only a practical, easily-stowed set of modern, efficient thoughts, he stumbles on a shelf of curated antiques.

In previous decades, the college libraries and even professor's offices had been cluttered with old thoughts that no one had used in years, which would collect dust and give off a musty, mildewed odor. But at the time the collector arrives at school, a movement to clear out these obsolete and perhaps liability-prone objects is in motion, and the college is getting rid of them by the crate. Rules against their possession appear in orientation materials and department emails, next to guidelines about sexual conduct and injunctions against the use of space heaters and hot plates. As long as the collector keeps his thoughts

hidden away in his dorm room, the situation is ideal: he even finds a rare thought from 1960's New York sitting on top of a college dumpster, next to a desk with a broken leg. To anyone else, they are junk, and would hardly stand out from the crates of broken laboratory flasks and rolls of blue-green foam insulation that darken behind the brick walls in the rain. He takes such thoughts in his backpack back to his room, where he cleans out the spiders' eggs and caked dust, and finds a place on his burgeoning shelves.

Laura, who studies weather criticism, once comes to his room when the collector's roommate is away, and picks up from a low table an 18th-century Prussian thought, heavy, carved in rosewood, with a glass window revealing elaborate brass gears inside. She picks it out from the army of pieces large and small, some so bulky they act as furniture, others so small and fragile they have to be stored behind glass. The collection hides any notion of the dorm room itself: the drywall, the desk with one part made in every country, his roommate's poster of a musician from the 60's who counseled his listeners not to attend university. Laura holds the bulky thought in her thin, pink fingers and turns it slowly before her.

"What is it supposed to do?" she asks. Her voice makes the object lowly resonate, like a grand piano when a train goes by.

"Everything, I suppose," the collector says.

"How does it work?" she asks.

"Oh, I don't think it ever worked," the collector says. "Beautiful, though, isn't it?"

"In a way," she says, inspecting the thought doubtfully. "But I wouldn't want it sitting in my living room, if that's what you mean."

For years he continues in this way, collecting his esoteric pieces and storing them away. After three years in college, it occurs to the collector that he might soon graduate, and

potentially upend his entire way of life. Many of his fellow collectors at school have given up the hobby to focus their efforts on more prudent pursuits, like collecting useful friends or money. He often sits and handles his collection, talking to himself about the future, or somehow talking to the broken old pieces themselves, which jingle and click but provide no answers. The natural course would be to seek out a job, with which he could begin to pay down his already-significant debt. He imagines himself dressed in a polo shirt, freshly shaved, sitting behind an almost empty desk, in a small office devoid of rusty or antiquated thoughts. He has never wished to enter the workplace: he has heard there are mostly mass-produced, disposable thoughts there, and bulky, rough-edged thoughts which might damage more fragile, older ones. His fears come to him as he lies on his twin mattress in his dorm room, the parking lot lights from the windows casting giant, menacing shadows of his thoughts. The workplace seems to him like a desert or a parking lot: an inevitable place, and maybe even a useful one, but nowhere for a civilized person to spend their life. One day, reading from an old almanac of antique thoughts, perusing their market values and original manufacturers, he has an idea. He wonders if it is possible to collect obsolete thoughts as a profession. But while such professionals abound in films and novels, it seems that all the full-time thought collectors he finds are either independently wealthy or retired. Meanwhile, his credit hours relentlessly accumulate; advisors begin to send emails; relatives put forward awkward questions. He struggles with this question for some months. Then it comes to him one day, at the beginning of his senior year, as he stares from his windows at an old live oak, whose leaves sway stubbornly in the new and blustery fall wind, but refuse to senesce or fall. His solution is to stay in school forever.

The collector is still turning over in his mind the best way to achieve this, when the Dean of Student Existence schedules a meeting with the collector, to make sure his transcript is in order to graduate. The dean's office is neat and clean, and the walls are hung with only a few photos, of the dean at various alumni golf tournaments. The dean is a tan, fit, middle-aged man with short-cropped gray hair and steel-blue eyes and bracing aftershave. The collector fiddles nervously with a small thought he carries with him, a glass one from 19th century Bohemia, its surface carved with the figure of a nude woman, her hair à la grecque. The dean clicks genially through a few screens on his computer, then smiles.

"Well, it looks like you're well under par to graduate this spring," he says. "Congratulations." His face beams gold and silver over the collar of his orange golf shirt. The collector looks down at his Grecian woman; in the fluorescents, she is almost white. Golf-club hands jerk by degrees around an orange-faced clock.

"I've decided to change majors," the collector says. "I'm not ready to graduate."

"Look," the dean says, "I wish I could play golf all day, but until I retire, I have to make money. I think you should start thinking clearly about what you want from the future." But it is no use: everything the collector wants is in the past.

The collector changes his major, the first of many such maneuvers, whose intended effect was to prolong his undergraduate career indefinitely. He changes majors regularly—focusing now on Psychology of Architecture, now on Sexual Archeology, now on the History of History. He drops classes, kicks them down the hall, picks them up again. The notion of planning a career fades into the background, like an abandoned strip mall. He stays in the dorm, avoiding his roommate, attending an eclectic but calculated set of classes, amassing his collection and his debt. His peers graduate, but he remains; he has a man's face

now, with a beard and old spectacle frames, and his clothes all worn in knee and elbow. He begins to see the first few years of college as the time before he had fully committed to his collection. The collection grows and grows: there are smooth, metal Italian thoughts from the 30's, little brass German thoughts from the late 19th century that ring like cymbals, and even a set of ancient Greek thoughts, terra cotta and common as clay. The shelves and stacks begin to cover every square inch of his dorm room: the light from the window filters through the odd shapes, refracting through crystal and shining off of steel. Behind all these thoughts, the walls grow dusty and cobwebbed; sometimes the collector finds a colored handout from a freshman seminar while re-arranging his pieces. The room is like a cave, whose walls are unstable heaps and where the air is thick with the odor of decaying thoughts.

The collector eventually runs out of room: every inch of the dorm is filled with his thoughts. Soon there is no room for his roommate. After several arguments, the roommate applies for a room change, and is not replaced: the dorm is old and unpopular, and the residence life people guess that the collector is unstable. Once the space freed up by his vanished roommate is used up, he creates more space by removing the ceiling tiles and prying up a few of the floorboards; he lines the insides of the walls with his thoughts, like a rat storing away food.

* * *

After many years, his collection and his debt become utterly impossible to sustain: he can never graduate, because his collection is too big to move and his debt is too big to pay off. By now, he has accustomed himself to the idea that even if he should want to, he can never graduate. It is now that an accident occurs. A fellow student, visiting the collector's room to see his collection, borrows a wood-handled well-worn Algerian thought, made in

the 1940's, and takes it home. The collector has inherited the thought from his uncle, but has never looked inside. It goes off in the friend's hands as he sits in his own apartment off campus: the thought must have been loaded all along. The campus police find him dead the next day.

The police take a statement from the collector. He feels like a suspect. The dean of Student Existence calls the collector in for another meeting. The tone of the message, emailed to his university account, is urgent. The meeting is late in the day: the building is quiet. Outside the windows, the fall sun is turning pink, and bats swirl around the bell tower like smoke. The timing and atmosphere of the meeting reminds the collector of an execution. The dean sits somberly in his chair. His skin is still pink, his hair silver; but he looks aged: deep engravings line his forehead, and the skin under his jaw droops. It occurs to the collector that several years have passed since their last meeting, and now the Dean's age has caught up with him: he is an old man. Was it the years, or the last few hours, which have aged him?

The dean gestures for the collector to sit down, but does not smile. He slowly centers a stack of papers on his desk, leveling the edges with his clean pink fingertips. This sets the stack of paper to rights with the room, where everything has right angles. The desk is so clean that the papers cast a dim reflection on the polished wood, doubling the depth of papers. The collector does not want to find out what the papers contain: he tries to begin some innocent small talk. But the Dean silences him with a raised hand, then speaks gravely.

"Were you aware that dangerous, disrepaired thoughts are prohibited on campus?" There is a regular ticking from somewhere, but it isn't the clock, whose hands move in silence.

"Any thought is dangerous," the collector says, "if handled improperly."

"You should have thought of that when you gave one to your friend," the Dean says. He pushes the stack toward the collector. "You are suspended immediately. This document sets out the terms of your suspension: you cannot return until you get rid of your hazardous collection."

"What am I supposed to do?" the collector asks.

"Do what I do," the Dean says. He opens a drawer and pulls out a shiny cube of metal, the topmost square face of which slowly rotates, emitting a confident tick. "My father took this to work with him every day for forty years. Now I have it, and it still works perfectly." He centers it on the clear desk. "One good thought is all you need."

* * *

The thought collector finds himself in a dire situation: he has only a few weeks to vacate the dorm, with nowhere to move his collection, dwindling funds, and no more loans forthcoming. After years of quiet stasis, aging in place among his thoughts, he finds himself thrown suddenly out into a world of immediate practical action. He feels like a gradeschooler who, separated by accident from a field trip tour, must orient himself toward an alien adult world. The simplest thing would be to agree to get rid of his collection. He glances every day at the suspension agreement, with its university stationary and page-wise initials. The copy of the agreement sits oddly on a stack of thoughts in his dorm, sticking out as cleaner and newer than anything around. But the collector feels that such an option must be a last resort: surely there is some way to save his collection. To discard it would be a self-betrayal, akin to cutting off a limb. He wakes from dreams of empty rooms with a

certainty that he must not take this course. He scarcely notices that, in his preoccupation, he has ceased to stumble upon new thoughts: they no longer come to him as they had before.

He thinks of what his fellow collectors have done, reaching back in his thoughts to years of graduating peers. He supposes that one must rent an apartment. He might simply box up his collection and store it in his new place. It might even be an improvement: his thoughts will have room to grow. Of all the possibilities, this stands out as most desirable. But after talking to realtors, he learns this is not so simple: he has no job and no rental history, and his bank will not co-sign: if he rents an apartment, it will be costly and miniscule. The likely picture emerges slowly and frustratingly out of a mass of online ads, for rent signs, and tips from friends. He finds, at best, a space no larger than his dorm.

The fall deepens, leaves fall, and the date of his departure nears. On reflection, he decides this is acceptable: he has lived in a small room, and he can continue to. He can fit the collection here—why not there? He has known some amateur collectors who lived in rooms in old buildings near the campus, their spaces packed with old thoughts. It seems even romantic. But after meeting with an agent to rent a tiny studio nearby, he learns it would require a deposit which he can't afford, especially not on top of the cost of moving his collection. The deposit amount, hand-written in blue ink, on a space left in the lease, stands out bright against the photocopied and typeset boilerplate, like a blue satellite in a night sky, retrograde and disastrous.

Finally, he decides he will need to sell off a good chunk of his collection, both to raise money, decrease moving costs, and allow him to fit his things into a tiny apartment. His friend Laura, now a successful professional and who makes frequent online sales, suggests the idea. At first the collector resists, but Laura consoles him by saying it will focus

his collection. He begins by standing in the center of his dorm room and staring around him at the stacks of thoughts, overwhelmed. At first he cannot decide which thoughts he will get rid of: they each seem equally sacrosanct. It is like choosing between his children. His solution is to keep only his most long-held, deeply-cherished thoughts—those he inherited, and those he has developed a strong attachment to. A new hierarchy of thoughts emerges from a chaotic heap. The Greek and Roman thoughts, at least the larger, heavier stone ones, will stay: he feels they give his collection a kind of ballast, and the shipping would cost too much anyway. He spends days cataloguing his collection, a seemingly endless task. He is too fond of his thoughts not to describe them fully to any potential buyer. When he sees, on the online auction site, the blank text field for describing each item, his mind floods with words. A single item—like a Mexican thought from the 1920s, a glass bottle layered with pilldust, gaping with cracks and covered with glass eyes—takes pages to describe. Laura helps: she listens to the collector extol each item aloud, summarizes the first few sentences, and adds a disclaimer for condition. "50's Ukrainian military thought: fur and leather, wood handle, sold as is. C. 1780 Canadian frontier thought, missing blade, sold as is. Am. Indian thought, possibly Navajo, very rare, novelty purposes only, sold as is." An empty space opens in the center of the dorm, then fills with cardboard boxes, shiny with stripes of packing tape. The proceeds of the auction are a disappointment to the collector—who of course never thought of their value to himself—but they cover his deposit and leave a little to live on. Only a few items remain listed for bids.

The collector begins settling into his new apartment, and moving his things out of the dorm. He feels depressed. The apartment, with its eggshell walls and beige carpet, feels sterile and empty. It is of a piece with its surroundings: a parking lot, a three-lane state

highway, corporate chain stores and restaurants, empty billboards. He has not had to move in many years, and can hardly remember the sense of loss he once felt, leaving his childhood home. He tries to settle in by unpacking the remainder of his collection. He packs his shelves with thoughts, fills the empty space. For a short time, he can imagine he is still at the college: windows, crowded with odd-shaped thoughts, might well look out onto a bell tower, and he thinks he hears it toll. But whenever he leaves the apartment to go grab a last item from the dorm or check the mail, the bleakness of asphalt and poured concrete overtakes him: first the bright, treeless light, then, eyes adjusting, the low horizon, bumpy with cars, and the heat radiating from the blacktop. It is like waking from a dream of swimming to find oneself in a desert.

The collector tries to focus on the future: he has a place to live and store his things, and enough money to fund a job search. He hopes that it will be enough time to find a job that suits his interests, and will allow him to live and work somewhere pleasant: he is not concerned with a large income. The collector has never done this before, and has little experience on which to draw. He imagines a part-time job clerking for a thought boutique, in an old house in a historic, leafy neighborhood.

This reverie is interrupted by a call from his bank: they want the collector to meet with his loan officer to arrange repayment plans. As the man on the phone talks, the collector tries to catch up. How much money does he owe? He had certainly never planned on paying it back. They agree that the loan officer will come to the collector's apartment to discuss his payments.

The man arrives on time, wearing a short-sleeve button-up shirt and khaki slacks, with a photo ID card clipped to his pants pocket. His hair is short and dark, and he smiles a

fixed smile. He reminds the collector of the students who joined college school spirit organizations. He greets the collector and pulls some paperwork from a nylon briefcase, laying it on a table. The loan officer begins to explain the payment plan, and the collector tries to understand what the agent is pointing out about the paperwork with the tip of his ballpoint pen. But it's impossible: the collector recognizes his name, his address; but the numbers—principal, interest, projected payments—were so large as to be completely alien. Surely they relate to the national economy, the budget for the military, something to do with outer space, or the history of evolution—rather than the collector, whose life has always seemed to him describable in simple, whole numbers, without decimal or comma. The collector finds himself simply nodding to all the officer brightly says. "Since you're unemployed now, we'll defer any payments until you find a job. You seem like a bright guy, so I'm sure that'll be no problem." The agent smiles widely at this. "Next we'll start basing your payments on a percentage of your income." He has highlighted the percentage, in a cheery hot pink. "Nothing to it, right?"

The collector tries to gather some objection. How could this be? Certainly his life cannot be determined by such a document, delivered by such a man. But he did not know quite how to state his claim, and in the end he signs the document, and slides back in his chair, defeated. The agent starts packing up to go, but on his way out the door, his eyes catch on a couple of bronze cloissoné thoughts, decorative covers too large for any text, on a shelf by the door.

"Say," the officer says, "You sure have a lot of old thoughts lying around. You ever get them appraised?"

"Oh, these old things?" the collector says. "Believe me, they're completely worthless."

"Too bad," the officer says. "I just got my new thought from corporate." He holds up a glowing flat rectangle with rubber edges. "We all use the same one. You know, in ancient Persia, guys like me used thoughts made of string and beads. I guess things haven't changed much since then. See you around!"

For a few days the collector reorients himself. He can take his time looking for a job, since his payments are deferred; and he can take a job at any pay, since the payments are a percentage. He browses dreamily through job listings for thought repairmen, thought cleaners, thought preservationists.

Then, the final auction item from his auctions sells. It catches an unusually high price: not enough to change the collector's position, but enough to imply a much higher value for his remaining collection as a whole. The bank finds out about the sale, and obtains a lien against his collection: if he fails to make required payments, the bank will seize his thoughts.

This lien brings home the need to meet the payments. The collector redoubles his efforts to find a job, since the deferral period only lasts a couple of months. But he finds that most of the jobs he wants either wouldn't pay his bills after the bank takes their cut, or require a degree and years of experience, or simply don't exist.

Finally he finds a job with a commercial thought manufacturer. The firm makes cheap copies of popular thoughts patented by competitors, mass-produced and poorly put-together. The job is an assembly line position, putting together the half-finished thoughts. The thoughts are used in offices: small beige plastic boxes with dull green screens that

automate everyday decisions, evaluate employees automatically for hire and fire, make loud noises when goals are missed, say where to place the desks. The factory is on a remote exit of a city freeway, a massive, cavernous concrete structure in a sprawling industrial park, with loading docks for trucks and a two-story cyclone fence. Inside, the huge space is lighted by hanging fluorescent bulbs, several long lines of people in paper masks hunch over conveyer belts, and the whine of drills and electric motors fills the air. The collector's supervisor, a man in a paper mask with crinkly eyes and a hacking cough, shows the collector to his work-station. It is a bench next to the assembly line with a power tool that hangs from the ceiling and a slant box of screws. Every day, for four stretches of two hours at a time, the collector uses an electric screwdriver to connect a plastic bezel to the motherboard assembly of one identical thought after another. The pay is such that he can pay rent, buy food, and pay a small portion of the interest on his loans. College soon seems a distant memory. No one else at the factory collects thoughts: to them, thoughts are work. As he works, his mind wanders to his collection at home, but after only a few weeks, he starts to have trouble remembering the appearance of his favorite thoughts: when he closes his eyes at night, he sees only the plastic bezel.

Months go by, and the collector continues at the factory. He spends his spare time with his collection, but he acquires few new pieces: he has no spare money, knows no one with whom to trade, and few thoughts seem to come to him. When he has been at the factory for about a year, the collector begins to develop a cough, which persists and steadily grows more violent. He loses sleep, feels chest pain. He has difficulty staying awake at the factory, and the coughing distracts him. He sees a doctor. The doctor takes x-rays. The collector's lungs are coated with a toxic substance, which off-gasses from the volatile

compounds used in the thoughts at the factory. The doctor advises rest, prescribes pain killers, sleeping pills. The collector takes the pills, but his cough and pain get worse. His fingers and toes tingle, then go numb. He sees dark spots in his vision. Soon he cannot grip with his fingers. The factory fires him.

When his next loan payment comes due, the collector calls his bank to explain he has lost his job and cannot pay. But no more deferrals are forthcoming. When the collector misses his payment, the bank forecloses on their lien. The collector attends the hearing, coughing into a handkerchief. The judge reasons that the lien is valid: the bank paid for the collector's education, so it follows that he owes them his thoughts. The collector is bedridden, and it is with difficulty that he rises to answer the door, when men from the bank come to take away his thoughts. It is a bright blue day, and the men let hot air in each time they open the door. Soon his apartment is empty. He wonders where his thoughts are now—spread out over the country, languishing in a warehouse, shattered and discarded on a garbage heap.

Even with all his possessions taken, he still must make payments. Now that he is at home alone at all times, he notices that thoughts start coming to him again, just as they did when he was a child: he will find them on the nightstand when he awakens, or lying in the bath while he showers. They are usually incomplete—just spare parts, really—rusty gears and cracked glass, frayed wire and yellowed paper, smelling of mold. But he begins, lying in bed, to tinker with them, and dreams of making a living this way. This gives him solace.

Once day, polishing a brass piece of a thought he has found in his refrigerator, it occurs to him that he might re-enroll in school: he never finished his degree, and his dangerous collection of obsolete thoughts has been taken from him. He contacts the school,

and speaks to a representative of a new dean of student existence—the old one has passed away—and this dean points him to some forms on the Internet. The collector fills out the forms, and after a few days spent fiddling with his new thoughts and coughing, he hears that he has been readmitted. All he needs to do is arrange for his bank to pay the tuition. He practices gripping a pen again.

But when the collector calls his loan officer, the officer explains as brightly as ever that the bank can extend the collector no more credit. "Your principal plus interest has grown so large, we can't let it go any further. We're running out of commas." The collector hangs up and lies in bed a whole day coughing. What can he possibly do?

It is with a mixture of anxiety and desperation that he rises one day to sell one of the thoughts that has come to him: it is a rusty steel box, and it rattles when he shakes it, but its small bulb glows a soft blue at sunrise on cloudy days, and it might help someone get out of bed. He takes it, sells it at a flea market, and deposits the small amount of cash at his bank on the way home. This deposit does not go unnoticed. That week, the collector receives a letter from his bank: due to his lack of wages and pursuant to his loan agreement, the bank has decided to begin garnishing the merchandise of the collector's new business: from then on, any thought that would come to the collector will instead go to the bank.

At first, the collector cannot believe it. He lies in bed, turning around a piece of a thought—it is harder and harder to hold them steady—and waiting for the other pieces to come to him. But ever after he receives the letter, no thoughts come: he looks under his bed, outside his window, even (when he feels well enough) in the parking lot outside his apartment. But it's no use: there's nothing there. The walls and billboards are blank, the sky is empty, there are no birds; when he sleeps, he does not dream; and when death comes—a

complication of his condition—his sleeping face is clear, calm, with few lines, and free of trouble.

"From The New Encyclopedia"

Polycyathus (5th C. BCE) Little is known about the pre-Socratic philosopher Polycyathus, and that little unlikeable: he was born at Dodona, and was old when Socrates was young (Plato reports that Socrates once tried to question Polycyathus, but that the later quickly "succumbed to wine-sleep"); he taught the doctrine that "nothing is good;" he believed that, of all the forms of governance, tyranny was best, because "it breeds monuments."

Although they never discoursed, Polycyathus is sometimes mentioned as an antithesis to Socrates: if the latter was incapable of intoxication, the former was incapable of sobriety. This may follow from another Polycyathic doctrine (alluded to by Aristotle) that argument "strains the organs," and must be balanced by the relaxing influence of wine. Accounts of his other teachings are scarce and contradictory. On cosmology, he held that the universe is made of urine; on logic, that all statements are false; on metaphysics, that the soul lives on after death, but that the afterlife is a kind of eternal hangover. (Elaborations on this last theory are at odds. Porphyry reports that in Polycyathus' afterlife all souls are equally hungover, while Diogenes Laertius says that some are more hungover than others, and that a few are still drunk.)

His ethics is relatively clear: "The good is nothing, and nothing is good." Because inaction was still something, it was judged to be no alternative: everything is bad. If it were possible to achieve nothing, that would be good, but it is man's destiny to be and do things, which are bad: only the gods do nothing. We know little else of Polycyathus. Legend tells

that he drowned himself in a bowl of water (or, alternately, in a gourd of palm oil). He left no disciples, although later thinkers found something to remark in what was reported of his philosophy, notably the obscene sculptor Gago, arguably the New Sussex novelist Noel Harried, and certainly the Epicurean poet Menoeus (who disagreed that nothing is good, since wine is good, and "wine is something").

Olisbophoros (Greek Ολισβοφορος, Dildo-Bearers). Gago, c. 430 BCE, National Archaeological Museum, Athens. The tendency toward naturalism in Classical sculpture may have reached its zenith with the Canon of Polykleitos, but it didn't stop there. Perhaps it should have. A few Athenian master sculptors carried their devotion to lifelikeness still further, to the chagrin of moralists. One such was Gago. Born in Delos, Gago is said to have drawn early inspiration from the archaic sculptures there, such as the giant stone phallus.

What we have of his bronze sculpture comes to us through Roman copies in marble, and these are surprisingly frank. His Olisbophoros is the best-known. It depicts a trio of young women engaged in the sale and demonstration of sexual aides. The central figure carries a generous woven basket, brimming with olisbos; art historians believe that her two companions demonstrated possible applications. Here the naturalist tendency has reached its logical destination, or perhaps bypassed it: rather than idealized gods and generals, Gago depicts mere merchants, and without timidity. The central figure's short chiton not only drapes naturally from her hips, but seems to be lifted by a stiff breeze to reveal an unathletic thigh. Her stance, with its exaggerated sway of the hips, is beyond contraposito. The figure on the left bends at the knees and holds an olisbo suggestively behind her own rump: Her

direct gaze is all that remains of archaic frontality. The figure on the right sports pustules and missing teeth. Her arms have been lost, and we must rely on accounts to imagine them: the Roman historian and social commentator Merula, who saw the statue at a palace of Nero's, tells us that she "dangled an artificial member near her rotting maw." Careful examination reveals the precision with which Gago treated his subject: each marble olisbo is rendered with thick folds as of leather, rolled at the edges and joined with individual stitches.

The only Roman marble copy of Olisbophoros resided in the collection of Castello Zzaragoza (near Alvito) when that castle was damaged by the French in 1789. The statue still contains embedded grapeshot. Pierre Beauchamp, a Master of Ceremonies for the notorious Zzaragozan debauches, reports in his Latin diary that one of the detached olisbos was present at the infamous Banquet of Hazelnuts, and that it was actually used there by Principessa Lucrezia, along with a dozen courtesans. Renaissance art historian Vincente di Padua was also patronized by the Zzaragozas, in which capacity he likely encountered the statue. Di Padua believed that Gago was a follower of Phidigonias (whose cult worshiped integers), and speculates that the number of olisbos, thirty, had a spiritual significance, since it was considered by the Phidigonians to be a sacred number, corresponding to the number of hexagons on the back of a turtle, and to the number of faces of an icosidodecahedron, which is the shape of the cosmos. Critics in our own time are more skeptical. Feminist theorist Asimwe Archer argues, in her Masks of the Zangbeto, that male Greek artisans depicted olisbos because they could not imagine female sexuality without the presence of the phallus: "What we are told that we 'know' about the Olisbophoros… is simply an apotropaic, another forbidding gesture of the nightwatchmen to prevent us from probing further into sexuality's fecund haystack."

Annelina Maximillian, **7th Lady Sotheby** (1832-1897). If the Victorian Age was replete with upperclass mystics, it was short on sister scientists; Lady Sotheby was both. Daughter of noted naturalist Sir Edgar Neal (discoverer of the now-extinct Neal's deep sea turtle, whose shell was like a small island) and Daria Broughton Bix, 6th Lady Sotheby (matron of the esoteric Catholic Order of the Blood-Lily), she combined her father's curiosity with her mother's eccentricity. She is credited with the discovery, in 1837, of the famed Sotheby Problem, whose precise formulation required the invention of a new system of numbers and whose correct solution has yet to be demonstrated. A recluse, she divided her time between decrypting the mathematics of the ancients and long sessions of meditation on certain geometric figures, whose contemplation she claimed provided direct insight into the hidden thoughts of God. At age thirty-six, she rejected the discipline of mathematics and founded the Thulian Astrothaumatic Society. The Thulians (whose original ranks included poet Darius Elgin and infamous eugenicist Paul Norsex) secretly elaborated a "metaphysical" cult which blended the polygon-worship of the Phidigonians with an elaborate system of ritual orgies that rivaled the Zzaragozas. In the Thulian heyday of the late 1910's, the society could claim dozens of influential members: of the seventeen heads of state present at the signing of the short-lived Seton Downs Agreement, thirteen were Astrothaumatics, and their emblem, the "No-Pointed Star," still appears clandestinely on the currency of several Western nations.

GAGO Developed at Pell Laboratories in 1976 by engineer Walter Norwich, this high-level programming language originated as a more efficient way to analyze fractal

patterns in aerial photographs of the coast of The People's Republic of Fuega. According to engineers who worked with Norwich, GAGO is a recursive acronym which stands for "GAGO Always Grows Orthogonally," although Norwich admitted in interviews that he was fond of the pseudo-eponymous sculptor. GAGO has gained narrow adoption in the development of hyperrealistic three-dimensional military simulations, but otherwise has never caught on widely: critics cite, as one of its barriers to adoption, the language's requirement that static variables be assigned in Sotheby numbers. GAGO formed the basis for the controversial poststructuralist programming language GAGONT.

Vincente di Padua (1440-1512). Hardly read today, di Padua was once canonical in certain sectors: the Astrothaumatic Chelson Blanbred called him "The Holy Critic," and his central work, In Interconfiguratio de Plures Canonum, once formed the keystone of the 17th century Enigmatic school of art history. A wave of Inquisitorial zeal condemned di Padua's work as a voluminous heresy; di Padua himself was imprisoned by the Zzaragozas after a treatise of his revealed the origin of their ill-gotten art objects. It was actually during this three-decade imprisonment, in a Milanese tower, that di Padua compiled his Interconfiguration.

This work proposes a simple yet vertiginous hypothesis: that, granting the Socratic doctrine, that all artists proceed under the blind tutelage of divine inspiration, it follows there must be some intelligence which connects the multiform images and objects that result. Di Padua's procedure was to record the various works of art known to him as though they were glyphs in some divine message—and to decode that message. His efforts spanned the various media: In the Phrygian mode, he identified an invective against sin; in the carved

bowsprits of the Norsemen, a narration of the cosmogony; in each gem of each cloisonné bracelet of each warlord of each third of Gaul, he read a single digit in the infinitely long number that is the unpronounceable name of God. The Paduan had a remarkable memory, and annotated long passages of the Septuagint from rote, since his long captivity denied him access even to a Bible.

What we have of his once-lengthy work is fragmentary, and like dreams of the Library of Alexandria, they do more to inflame the imagination than to inform the mind. For his secular betrayals he spent his old age in a dungeon; for his spiritual crimes, the Church doctors ordered his works banished to that other oubliette, the flame.

Noel Harried, DONS, GDE, OBC, QQ (1890-2016). In an obituary in the New York Moon, book critic Noam Bronzeman wrote, "To say that Harried was the greatest living female writer in New Sussex would be to say that Paris is the French city with the best access to rail: That is, to comically understate the truth. We cannot even say she is the greatest writer in any language living or dead. We must simply say: She is the best." Likewise, to say that Harried was a famous hard-luck case is to understate the sad facts: If Job had been a woman, she'd have pitied Noel Harried. The only child of a large family to survive to adulthood (her hometown of Babley, New Sussex was an important gradium mining center and her siblings and parents all succumbed to severe cases of black spine), Harried married at twelve to the first of at least seven husbands (whom she later described en masse as "a pod o piss-drunk marmaloos") and began giving birth to her nineteen children, each of whom she sadly survived. She suffered throughout her very long life from a rare form of synaesthetic neuralgia, in which bright colors registered as sensations of

intense physical pain. This condition may have driven her to live out most of her many years in a small house on Cadmer's Islet, a Pacific New Sussex hamlet where it has been raining continuously since the spring of 1956.

Harried's production of prose, like her production of people, was prolific; fortunately, the former survived. Her lifework, the autobiographical novel Precipitation, consists at the time of this writing of over seventy thousand pages, and her publisher Norwick Shambly Fimbler & Sons has announced that they will be bringing forth "several dozen" posthumous volumes.

Praise for Precipitation is wide-ranging. Harried received almost every international literary award: the Kleiber Prize, the Ringer Prize, the Morton Mooker Award, induction into the Ordre des Chevaliers du Republique des Lettres, the Ribbon of Eternal Peace, the Crystal Goblet (shared with Zǒrba Dnvlbsk), and the Delf Medal. Prime Minister Shiro Watanabe made Harried a Japanese citizen so that she could receive the Midori Katana, the envied emblem of the Order of the Beneficent Chrysanthemum. Harried's fellow writers share the sentiment. Translator Will Flanagan called Precipitation "a hundred Finnegan's Wakes"; Poet Ye Ye wrote, in her dedicatory verse for the inscription of the recently-erected Harried Monument in Beijing, "Before we read from her Precipitation / we did not know / we did not know what rain was"; Fuegan writer Manuel Luis Zaragoza, in his 1972 essay on Harried entitled "The Invention of Rain," described Precipitation as "that sad and infinite novel whose influences are secret and whose only imitation is the universe." Her critics point to the novel's elaborate deployment of the New Sussex dialect and lack of punctuation as obstacles to understanding. In a rare 1996 interview in her Cadmer's Islet home, Harried responded at length to this criticism, but attempts at transcription have so far failed.

Harried died in 2016 when she was bitten by a Neal's latrine viper. She once wrote that she expected to be "burton babs long efta def"; given the amount of forthcoming posthumous material, we can certainly expect to meet more of her literary progeny, even now that that decorated and disconsolate dame has been long-listed for her last award.

Curriculum Vitae

Byron Landry was born in Galveston, Texas. He received a BA from the University of Texas at Austin and a JD from Rutgers University. His fiction has appeared in *Tin House* online, *Conjunctions* online, *Bat City Review*, and elsewhere.